

## THE AESTHETICS OF COLOUR AND BRILLIANCE – OR WHY WERE PREHISTORIC PERSONS INTERESTED IN ROCKS, MINERALS, CLAYS AND PIGMENTS?

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**ABSTRACT.** The authors present an exploration of why prehistoric persons were so interested in highly coloured and shining objects. They propose an aesthetic of colour and brilliance that emerged in the Balkan early farming period and developed as a key feature in the Climax Balkan Copper Age, influencing all forms of material culture and underpinning the dazzling development of goldworking technology represented in the Varna Chalcolithic cemetery.

### Introduction

In a conference devoted to archaeogemmology (archaeo-mineralogy), we should be disappointed not to find important summaries of new empirical findings, especially characterisation studies and technological analyses. The findings on faceting of carnelian beads in the Varna Chalcolithic cemetery (Kostov, 2007), awaken us to the extraordinary achievements of prehistoric craftspersons in making visually stunning objects.

Less obvious, perhaps, is why prehistoric persons should bother to expend such energy in the making of things – not just the time needed to make a polished stone axe but the embodied skills built up over many years. Is there an underlying rationale behind the production of colourful and shining objects in prehistory? In this short contribution, we seek to summarise one possible dimension – the existence in the Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic of an aesthetic of colour and brilliance based on an explicit valuation of such qualities in an object. Such a valuation is, in turn, based upon the ritual values embedded in bright, colourful objects. For an explanation of the link between aesthetics, ritual and values, we turn to social anthropology.

### Social anthropological background to prehistoric aesthetics

Many ethnographers have made the connection between distinctive colours, brilliant surfaces and ritual power and potency. One leading researcher makes this claim in ways that are of particular interest to us. Nick Saunders has identified shininess as a key element of an aesthetic of pan-Amerindian metalworking (Saunders, 2003). Saunders identifies widespread values placed on shiny matter – also often of distinctive colour, such as gold – derived from pan-Amerindian beliefs about the spiritual and creative power of light. Because they were believed to be physical representations of light, brilliant objects were seen as charged with cosmological power. Saunders summarises the case by stating that "Making

shiny objects was an act of transformative creation, trapping and converting ... the fertilising energy of light into brilliant solid forms" (Saunders, 2003, 21). These shiny objects became objects of social prestige, centrally located in the symbolic representation of political power and elite status. Here, Saunders specifies the religious beliefs which underpin a very specific transformation of the material world.

Building on these insights, we can start to develop the basis for a materially-based aesthetic linked to persons, practices and things. The epicentre of the aesthetic is the valuation of a quality or qualities in the material world which, by dint of a close physical match, symbolises to a high degree one or more core religious beliefs held to underpin society. To the extent that the objects exhibiting the key quality/ies are the products of high craft skill, the link between making the object and reinforcing its ritual connotations becomes stronger and the more mystic and enchanting the technology involved in this transformation of nature into cultural order. Insofar as the makers take on the qualities of the objects, they become ritual specialists who reinforce the cosmological associations of the objects.

### Shine and colour among Balkan early farmers (6300-5300 BC)

There is good grounds for accepting that the earliest farmers of the Karanovo I/II, Kremikovci, Starčevo, Criş and Körös regional groups of the Early Neolithic exchanged and/or acquired small numbers of sacred items from beyond their daily territories (Chapman, 2007). These objects created and enriched a new visual identity for this period, based upon the striking colours and brilliance of fine painted, slipped and burnished pottery. Whether local or exotic in origin, all of the major artifact classes contributed to this identity – most of all pottery, because it was so common in the household and the settlement - but also polished stone ornaments and tools, animal and human bone, burnt things, marine shell ornaments of *Spondylus gaederopus* and objects made of copper or

copper minerals. These objects extended both the colour spectrum and the range of shine of the foraging world (Borić, 2002). Increasing numbers of coloured and shining objects broadened the possibilities for metaphorical links between objects with the same colour – whether the red of the copper awls, the burnished red bowls and the autumn leaves or the green of the malachite beads, the nephrite sceptres and swastikas and fresh vernal growth. This visualisation of the symbolic properties of exotic objects manifested in distinctive colours and polished textures created a public and spontaneous excitement that linked such objects and their owners to the numinous and the remote, as well as to the world of the ancestors. It was the creation of new relations through objects of colour and brilliance that helped in the making of new worlds in the Neolithic (Whittle, 1996).

A detailed study of the depositional context of exotic objects (Chapman, 2007) indicated that stone and shell ornaments were more frequently found outside rather than inside the house. In addition, all classes of exotic objects except metals were found with burials, showing their personal links with the newly dead. Thirdly and tellingly, exotic objects were generally excluded from ritual contexts vital for the social reproduction of early farming communities, because their meanings were too different from those of local objects to gain *local* ritual significance.

### **Mature farming communities (5300-4800/4700 BC)**

In the late phase of the early farming period, dark burnished fine wares spread across the southern Balkans (Garašanin, 1954), as new pottery assemblages in strong contrast to the local traditions of light-faced painted wares. The virtual disappearance of painted wares at the start of the mature farming period was perhaps a sign of the decisive strengthening of some social groups over others.

Balkan prehistorians have generally overlooked two fundamental traits of dark burnished ware, viz., the surface colour and brightness of the pottery. Considerable firing skills were required to produce completely reducing firing conditions, which differentiated the resulting black wares from even medium and dark grey vessels. The most lustrous black burnished wares was produced by vitrification of the ceramic surface at temperatures of cca. 1200°C. The aesthetic result of these two technical achievements was a startlingly attractive object that shone like an obsidian core, putting all other ceramics into the shadow. I suggest that the colour symbolism and aesthetic appeal of dark, and especially black, burnished and polished wares were of major significance for their gradual emergence as the preferred fine ware over wide areas of Anatolia, the Aegean and the Balkans in the late VI and early V mill. Cal BC. The colour black may have symbolized a wide range of persons, states of being or places, varying between regions or even settlements but retaining everywhere its aesthetic attraction.

The VI mill. BC peak in black/dark burnished pottery assemblages provides a visual context for all other bright, colourful objects. It is surely not a coincidence that the peak in obsidian exchange networks coincided with this ceramic peak in the Central Balkans. But most other shiny objects created colour contrasts with the pottery – whether the marble, rock

crystal or alabaster “animal” heads of the Vinča group (Chapman, 1981) or the lighter polished stone axes, whose huge increase in production related to their frequent use as stone hoes as well as their symbolic importance in linking up different places in the landscape. The increasing use of copper objects, especially as grave goods, provides another colour contrast to obsidian. The strongest colour contrast with black pottery and obsidian came with the predominantly white seashells of the genus *Spondylus gaederopus*, which formed Europe’s first long-distance exchange network, connecting the Aegean to the Paris Basin in the late VI mill. BC (Séfériades, 2003).

### **Aesthetic elaboration in the Climax Balkan Copper Age (4800/4700-4000 BC)**

The overwhelming impression from many classes of climax Copper Age objects is a high level of diversity combined with increased scales of production. This diversity is linked to complex communities consisting of persons with both novel skills (copper-smelting, weaving, cheese-making, etc.) or traditional skills (axe-making, potting, figurine-making) (Chapman, Gaydarska, 2006). Two of the key elements in the material environment of these groups are colour and brilliance.

No-one looking at the finely produced painted wares of the Cucuteni-Tripolye groups (Mantu, Dumitroaia, 1997) could fail to be impressed with their bold colours, dramatic motifs and surface polish, especially in comparison with the variegated shell-tempered wares and other coarse and medium wares. Similarly, the principal ceramic innovation of the Kodzhadermen-Gumelnița-Karanovo VI group – graphite painting (Todorova, 1978) created the effect of silver motifs shimmering on the surface of the vessel, like the rays of the moon on the Danube at night. The large quantities of bright, colourful vessels in and around houses in most settlements of these groups provided continuous visual recall of a community aesthetic that was visually well established.

The range and diversity of highly coloured, polished objects in the climax Copper Age is greatly extended by a consideration of polished stonework. A shining example concerns the tubular, red carnelian beads – a rare class of mortuary goods found only in the Varna and Durankulak cemeteries so far. Recent gemmological analyses has revealed up to 16 fine, perfectly executed faceting on each tapering side of the beads to produce the reflection of even more surface brilliance (Kostov, 2007). The close association of the body of the person with the flashing beads that they wore, presumably on special ceremonial occasions, created a lasting aesthetic bond between person and thing. Since there was no other reason to produce facets other than to create additional brilliance, carnelian beads serve as an excellent illustration of climax Copper Age aesthetics.

The biggest expansion in colour came with the increased use of copper minerals and the creation of a new object-colour – gold. When newly finished, cast or beaten copper objects presented a shiny brown surface that, like people, could change appearance with age, becoming more textured and more variegated in colour. The emergence of heavy cast copper objects – predominantly axes, chisels and daggers – has rarely been discussed in terms of flashing blades, colour

and luminosity (but see Keates, 2002 for Italian Copper Age daggers). The mounting of blades, whose large surface area created spectacular brilliance, on finely crafted wooden or bone handles, in contrasting colour to that of the blade, increases the object's visual prominence in the performance where it would be a significant actor.

A specific feature of the Varna cemetery is the emphasis on gold (Ivanov, 1988). Renfrew (1986) has sought to explain the significance of gold in terms of its permanent colour, the extraordinary technology of gold painting and the covering of gold on status objects and important body zones. However, he misses the more fundamental point that gold is the brightly coloured, luminous material *par excellence* with the potential to make a visually explosive contribution to an aesthetic founded on colour and brilliance. Indeed, it could be proposed that gold would never have been selected for the prominence it enjoyed at Varna without the earlier existence of such an aesthetic! The relative rarity of gold in mortuary sites other than Varna, as well as in all domestic contexts, is another sign of the special aesthetic and political value of gold. While it is doubtful that the vast majority of Copper Age people ever set eyes on this material, those who did must have recognized its unique qualities in Copper Age object-colours (Chapman, 2007a).

## Discussion and conclusions

The social impact of colour and brilliance has been widely underestimated in European prehistory, although advances have been made in our understanding of the colouring of the past (Jones, MacGregor, 2002; Chapman, 2003). If we step back from the details of the material culture that is excavated in such profusion in Balkan and Central European prehistory, what we can appreciate is a colourful world where object-colours were just as important as environmental colours in the creation of significance and meaning. The recognition of focal colours – that small group of colours of greatest visual significance in social practices – was related to object-colours as much as environmental colours and colour terminologies. The naming of an object-colour, based upon a specific kind of flint or chert, represented one way to make the world comprehensible and meaningful. The relation of each object-colour to every other focal colour led to the development of an overall system of colour symbolism which gave meaning to the prehistoric world.

On the most general level, this account of prehistoric object-colours indicates an overall continuity of aesthetic appreciation and therefore political significance at the millennial timescale – from cca. 6500-3500 Cal BC. The contribution of colour and brightness to social identities has been an important one over 100 generations. It is equally clear that communities living in three successive phases of Balkan prehistory – the early farming period, the mature farming period and the climax Copper Age – each worked out their own particular form of the shared general aesthetic of colour and brilliance. Three innovations can be identified as offering particularly great potential for the emergence of new colour schemes – the introduction of pottery, the emergence of stone-carving and the development of cast copper metallurgy. Each change allowed craft specialists and household producers to create new forms whose surfaces shone and gleamed with colour and brilliance. In relation to metallurgical colours, a particularly important suggestion is that it was the antecedent colourful aesthetic that

was a pre-requisite for the choice of gold as the key medium at Varna.

It is also important to recall that this aesthetic was not entirely 'Balkan' in origin or development. While the range of object-colours was noticeably narrower among early farmers in Central Europe (the Linearbandkeramik) and later worlds to the North West, or in coeval foraging societies in the North Pontic zone, farming communities in Greece and North West Anatolia shared some fundamental object-colours with those in the Balkans and Hungary – not least the earlier painted styles and the later dark burnished ware traditions. The implications of gross variations in object-colour range require further investigation. But it seems highly probable that the Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic played a key role in the spread of an aesthetic of colour and brilliance to regions further to the North, North-East and West. In conclusion, we should not forget that the research skills of geoarchaeologists and archaeo-mineralogists are fundamental to prehistorians' further understanding of the visual world of material culture that forms the core of their discipline.

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